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Age Appropriate

They may be decades away from confronting the issues they're studying, but that isn't stopping the students in Michelle Horhota's psychology seminar.

BY LINDSAY NIEDRINGHAUS '07

Michelle Horhota, assistant professor of psychology, quickly scans the classroom as she sips her cup of tea. A student pulls out

hummus and pretzels alongside her notebook. Another rushes in carrying an overstuffed folder full of the semester's printouts. A few minutes later, Erin, the class's discussion leader for the day, clears

her throat. "Let's start with the Finn article," she begins.

The article presents a study on Lumosity, a company that produces "brain training" video games that claim to sharpen declining minds.

These games test everything from attention and processing speed to visual memory, all with the goal of improving an aging person's performance across a range of tasks that supposedly apply to everyday life.

Horhota's students, however, aren't buying it.

Several point out that the methodology of the study is flawed, with an "atrocious sample size," lack of a control

variable, and inconclusive results.

The article, they say, is one of many that seeks to prove such brain games are valid, but more rigorous scientific studies have shown that such games only improve a user's skills in the games themselves and do not transfer.

In the ensuing animated discussion, the class sides with neuroscientists—in particular, a group of 30 scientists who denounced conclusions made by companies like Lumosity in a letter entitled "The Consensus on the Brain Training Industry from the Scientific Community." One of the signatories was Furman's own Gil



"I encourage my students to question the attributions we make about older adults and if our traditional treatment of them accelerates their decline."

Einstein, William R. Kenan, Jr. professor of psychology.

"They're playing off of the fears of older adults," says one student. "[They're] couching marketing tactics in the form of scientific evidence. It's extremely manipulative and potentially harmful, as these adults are spending their retirement money on the games.

"They're also spending less time doing things like taking walks outside—activities proven to be beneficial—in order to play a video game that hasn't proven to do anything."

Horhota structures her seminar—titled "The Psychology of Aging"—much like a graduate-level course, with the students leading weekly

discussions.

Under her guidance, the discussion leader chooses topics and corresponding primary articles, and the rest of the class submits response papers to the leader.

This semester, in addition to the Lumosity debate, subjects have ranged from the stereotypes of aging adults and the impact of exercise on cognition, to the enlistment of companion robots in health care.

But why convene a class on one's golden years when Horhota and her students are years from facing them?

"My grandmother was an important influence in my

life," says Horhota. "She never let others treat her as if she was at any disadvantage due to her age. She aged really well compared to others her age, and it inspired me to begin investigating the extent to which aging is influenced by a person's attitude."

Horhota says that, in this course, she "encourages her students to question the attributions we make about older adults and if our traditional treatment of them and their acceptance of that treatment accelerates their decline."

What Horhota and her students are wrestling with is the extent to which aging is psychological.

Do our—and Lumosity's—preconceptions about older adults lead us to treat them as dependent subjects?

Additionally, if these adults accept this treatment, do they then begin to perceive themselves as less adept at handling everyday tasks?

And yet by wanting to protect older adults from the marketing tactics of companies like Lumosity—stating that they are taking advantage of these adults—Horhota's students are actually agreeing with the idea that older adults are a special class that is vulnerable to manipulation and easily exploited.

Would the students find as much issue with such brain training if it was marketed exclusively to young adults?

Still, in their desire to protect older adults, Horhota's students could be raising something equally important: that denying the realities of aging might also be an injustice to older adults, whose care and respect society overlooks at its own peril.

"I would sign Dr. Einstein's letter," concludes one student. "It's frustrating just talking about it. I want to do something about it." **F**